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Follow-up to the World Summit for Social Development and the twenty-fourth special session of the General Assembly: priority theme: social integration

Statement submitted by World Youth Alliance, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with ECOSOC

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.5/2009/1.

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Statement

Social integration is a process whereby all members of society live and work together for the common good. This process can best be understood as a commitment to *solidarity*. As solidarity is the foundation for sustainable development and the building of free, just and peaceful societies, the World Youth Alliance welcomes the choice of "Social Integration" as the theme of the forty-seventh session of the Commission for Social Development.

Solidarity

We, young people from all regions of the world, commit to living and promoting solidarity in all human relationships. Recalling that the intrinsic dignity of each person is the foundation of all just human interactions, and recalling that this dignity is inalienable and cannot be mitigated in any degree; we affirm that every person is free, possessing the power to choose to act in accordance with the reality of the dignity of all persons.

In light of this understanding of the human person and human relationships, we particularly commit ourselves in solidarity to all those who live in need, experience the vulnerability and hardships of war, famine, disease or social unrest, and who suffer from poverty and hopelessness. In keeping with this commitment, we have addressed the theme of social integration in the context of young people, persons with disabilities and the family.

Themes of the forty-seventh session

The World Youth Alliance joins the international community in its commitment to integrate all members of society, especially members of marginalized groups, and to foster an environment that enables their integral development as persons. We particularly draw the commission's attention to the needs of youth, persons with disabilities, and families, particularly those living in poverty.

Youth

Global statistics on youth highlight the urgent need to integrate them into any development agenda. According to the World Youth Report (2005), youth - defined as persons aged 15 to 24 – constitute approximately 18 percent of the total global population (1.1 billion), and youth and children together, including all those aged 24 years and younger, account for nearly 40 percent of the world's population. In many countries of the world, particularly in the developing world, there is a youth majority with the creative potential to transform society.

Due to poverty and the associated absence of adequate health care, education and employment opportunities, much of the creative potential of these young people could be lost. Approximately 238 million young people live in extreme poverty, and of these about 133 million are illiterate. Youth comprise approximately 41 percent of the world's unemployed people. Today millions of adolescents, particularly girls, also face the prospect of incomplete education which increases their chances of living in poverty, as well as contracting infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

We call on states and civil society to invest in and strengthen basic health care, which will allow all members of society to live healthier lives and free them to develop their talents and contribute to the common good. Improvements in basic health care will also reduce the care-giving responsibilities of many young people, particularly in the developing world, and prevent interruptions in their formal education.

Finally we ask the international community to show solidarity with families - the greatest influence in the lives of young persons - and to partner with families and their communities to create optimal conditions for the integral development of youth.

Concretely, we recommend the following:

1) Member states should fulfill commitments to ensure access to primary and secondary education. They should also work in partnership with civil society to strengthen domestic institutions of higher education and to make university education and vocational training more accessible and affordable. The role of parents and families as the first educators of individuals needs to be respected. Families should be recognized as a critical structure for the continual growth and education of young people.

2) Programs that provide alternative educational opportunities for those children and youth who are most vulnerable, or the most marginalized should be introduced and supported.

3) Policies and practices that enable youth, especially in developing countries, to take an active role in the workforce through training programs and internships, should be developed and implemented.

Persons with Disabilities

Persons with disabilities represent a significant percentage of the global population (approx. 10 percent) and evidence suggests that they are disproportionately represented among the world's poor. According to a 2008 report of the Economic and Social Council (E/CN.2/2008/6), there are approximately 650 million persons with disabilities in the world. An estimated 80 per cent of these persons live in developing countries, many in conditions of poverty. It is also estimated that of the world's poorest people, 1 in 5 is a person with disabilities. Persons with disabilities are subjected to discrimination that limits their participation in society. Too often governments and communities fail to provide for the special health care and education services persons with disabilities need for their integral development.

The problem of poverty and exclusion of persons with disabilities is fostered by harmful cultural attitudes that see the disabled as undesirable members of society; such attitudes exist in both developed and developing countries. In many countries, pre-implantation genetic diagnosis and prenatal screening technologies are used to identify persons with disabilities prior to birth; these individuals are frequently targeted for termination based solely on their disability. This practice

ignores the intrinsic dignity and worth of the human person. Such discrimination must be discouraged by the Commission and recognized as a violation of human rights.

Solidarity with persons with disabilities requires an appreciation of their unique gifts and contributions to society as persons. We call on governments and civil society to establish policies and structures that ensure the integration and participation of people with disabilities in mainstream economic, social and political life. Such policies and structures would address the special health, educational and personal development needs of persons with disabilities and support those who care for them, in particular their families and communities.

Concretely, we recommend the following:

1) The development of programs, particularly within civil society, that encourage positive cultural attitudes relating to persons with disabilities. These programs should offer support and resources to the families and other persons who provide care to persons with disabilities.

2) The encouragement of educational opportunities suited to the needs of persons with disabilities in order to foster their integration in society.

3) Member States should protect persons with disabilities and other vulnerable members of society, from discriminatory practices that deny them their human rights. In particular, the use of medical technologies to diagnose disabilities in order to terminate the life of persons with disabilities before birth is a violation of human rights. Such practices must be clearly and forcefully condemned by this Commission.

4) Member States should fulfil their international commitments in the areas of health care, infrastructure, good governance and security and make provisions for the special needs of the most vulnerable members of society.

Families in poverty

Families sustain society and give life to the next generation. As the fundamental unit of society, the family ensures the sustainability of civilization and culture. It takes on essential tasks in the care of all, especially the weakest and most vulnerable. At its best, the family exemplifies intergenerational solidarity and its failure has tragic consequences for its members, particularly for children, and increasingly for older persons.

We call upon states to partner with families and communities in addressing the integral development needs of socially marginalized persons. Such a partnership requires the creation of employment opportunities and the elimination of discriminatory employment practices, particularly against older persons and women. It also requires the international community to fulfill its commitments in the areas of health care, education, infrastructure, good governance and security. Families, particularly those in poverty, disproportionately bear the effects of gaps in these key development areas.

It is through solidarity with youth, older persons and persons with disabilities that societies will make progress in achieving social integration.

Concretely, we recommend that:

1) Member states and civil society actors partner with families, particularly in countries facing rapid population ageing, to develop programs and resources that will facilitate home based care and foster intergenerational solidarity.

2) Member states should develop economic structures that do not penalize the choices of individual families in the provision of educational and other developmental needs of their children, and in meeting and providing for the needs of older persons and persons with disabilities.

3) Member states in partnership with civil society should develop policies that will promote economic growth, job creation and access to basic health care and education, particularly for families in rural areas.